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SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

STATE FOR WHA/CAR (JMACK-WILSON) (BALVARADO) (VDEPIRRO) (WSMITH)
WHA/EPSC (MROONEY) (FCORNEILLE)
EEB/ESC/IEC/EPC (MCMANUS)
SANTO DOMINGO FOR FCS AND FAS
TREASURY FOR ERIN NEPHEW
INR/RES (RWARNER)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EFIN](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [ASEC](#) [JM](#) [XL](#)

SUBJECT: JAMAICA: STEWART TO LEAD JAMAICA TEACHERS UNION, EDUCATORS
PONDER STRIKE FOR BACK PAY

REF: A. KINGSTON 581

Summary

1. (SBU) As Michael Stewart takes the reins of the Jamaica Teachers' Association (JTA), one of the island's largest public sector unions, he finds himself caught between: a public education system in disarray; an Education Ministry facing severe fiscal restraints, demanding greater accountability for performance, and hedging on promises of back pay; and a disgruntled membership pondering a strike that might delay the beginning of the school year in September. Stewart calls for better relations with the Ministry of Education, noting that "we don't want to feel that we are constantly under attack by our chief teacher." End Summary.

"Teach your children well..."

1. (U) On August 18, Stewart, a high school principal, took over as president of the JTA, the labor union representing almost 23,000 of the island's oft-maligned public school teachers. Accepting the post at the association's annual convention in Ocho Rios, Stewart pledged "to ensure that teachers and teaching redeem the place of pride it once occupied." Stewart committed himself to lobbying the Government of Jamaica (GOJ) for reduced class sizes, allowing more students access to post-secondary education, and more scholarships for those studying to be teachers.

2. (U) Stewart will have his work cut out for him. Despite the fact that, excluding debt servicing, education spending constitutes almost thirty percent of the GOJ budget, the Jamaican public education system is widely perceived as dysfunctional, and many consider public teachers and the JTA part of the problem. As Education Minister Andrew Holness pointed out in his remarks to the association on August 19, as many as one quarter of sixth grade students were reading at a fourth grade level, while one third were academically unprepared for secondary school. Each year, school administrators routinely exclude almost half of 11th graders from participating in the Caribbean Examination Council's Caribbean Secondary Education Certification (CSEC) examinations, generally viewed as an employment qualification certifying the holder as a secondary school graduate. Of those who do take the examination, barely more than half pass the English portion while just 43 percent pass mathematics. Most families with the means to do so place their children in private schools.

3. (U) Under its previous president, Doran Dixon, the JTA proved ineffective in countering these trends. Calling for increased teacher salaries while resisting efforts to tie compensation to results in the classroom, the JTA attempted to shift responsibility for lackluster examination results by blaming the public school

feeder system through which high-achieving students are channeled into the island's top public high schools, leaving the remainder to languish in overcrowded and under-resourced institutions. Nevertheless, Porus High School, the non-elite public school Stewart has administered as principal, has seen its test scores rise under his leadership.

"How can you have any pudding if you don't eat your meat?"

14. (U) Public school teachers have threatened labor action and disruption of the beginning of the 2009/2010 school year, scheduled for September 7, if the GOJ fails to present an acceptable formula for compensating teachers for USD 90 million in back pay they are owed due to a 2007 reclassification. The reclassification, which the Jamaica Labour Party-led (JLP) government inherited from the outgoing People's National Party (PNP) government in 2007, was designed to make teacher salaries more competitive with those in the private sector. As a result of the reclassification, each of the 23,000 union members is owed over USD 1,100.

15. (U) However, faced with its worst economic crisis in decades, the GOJ is poorly situated to make good on the promise. With its economy expected to contract by four percent in 2009, and one of the highest levels of public sector debt in the developing world, the GOJ has seen its Standard and Poor's debt rating downgraded and is widely expected to announce a new agreement with the International Monetary Fund for assistance next month (Reftel A). To avoid increasing the USD 1.4 billion public sector wage bill, the GOJ has already told public sector employees not to expect the seven percent wage hike that had been promised this year.

16. (U) On August 17, the JTA rejected Education Minister Andrew

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Holness's proposal that the government pay off the back wages over three years beginning in 2011, threatening to report the GOJ to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and intimating some sort of labor action that might interfere with the beginning of the new school year on September 7. "We believe that the time of correspondents (sic) to and fro is not helping the process of advancing the welfare of the Jamaican teachers and...some message must be sent," Stewart told the assembled delegates. "Normality cannot be guaranteed for the start of the 09/10 school year..."

17. (U) In his response before the JTA's annual convention the following day, Holness recognized that the imbroglio had damaged the GOJ's credibility with teachers but implored his audience for leniency given the GOJ's difficult financial straits. "This Government wants to pay the teachers what they deserve," Holness promised, and pointed out that teachers' wages had increased by 59 percent since the JLP came to power in 2007. Stewart responded that the delegates would have to discuss further the GOJ proposal and the possibility of a strike.

Conclusion and Analysis -----

18. (SBU) Jamaica's education problems run deep. Many public schools are dilapidated, overcrowded, and poorly equipped, while many public school teachers are poorly paid and blamed for poor educational outcomes that they see as out of their control. The CSCE tracking system channels the nation's brightest students into its best schools and opens doors to myriad educational and professional opportunities, while consigning the thousands that don't make the cut to substandard institutions, poor literacy and math skills, and bleak prospects. Given the GOJ's current economic travails, neither major reforms nor increased revenues appear likely.

19. (SBU) Furthermore, Stewart takes the helm of a JTA with a tarnished national image and a frustrated membership. Despite demands for higher salaries and a greater public appreciation for the difficulties they face, the JTA has resisted GOJ efforts to link pay to classroom performance. Similarly, the union's current intransigence and threats to strike over the back pay issue have not gone over well with the media and the public given the state of

Jamaica's economy and the GOJ's budgetary constraints. As he takes his new post, Stewart will have to decide whether to appeal to the frustrations of his membership by escalating tensions with the Education Ministry, or to challenge entrenched attitudes within the JTA and meet the GOJ half way. The stakes for Jamaica's students couldn't be higher.

¶10. (SBU) Finally, Minister of National Security Dwight Nelson, who was formerly Minister of the Public Sector in the Ministry of Finance and Public Sector, bears watching. Nelson, a trade unionist who was appointed to the National Security Ministry in April, 2009, retains strong ties to the trade union community and might be expected to intervene should the prospect of a strike threaten social stability or public safety. End Summary.

Parnell